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From Bay of Pigs to the Contras, Rodriguez Fights On**Crash Puts Shadow Warrior in Spotlight**By DOYLE McMANUS and WILLIAM R. LONG, *Times Staff Writers*

WASHINGTON—It was April 17, 1961. Felix Rodriguez, a 19-year-old Cuban exile, had been secretly inside Fidel Castro's Cuba for six weeks, waiting for a signal from the CIA that the Bay of Pigs invasion had begun. Rodriguez had explosive charges primed and in place, ready to blow up Castro's bridges; his agents were standing by to cut telephone lines and foment disorder.

The invasion began at dawn. But not until midday did the saboteurs' messages arrive—and by then, it was too late: Castro's men were already rolling up the underground networks. "The roads were closed, the houses were surrounded and they were arresting thousands of people," Rodriguez said later. "I cried."

For 25 years since that day, Felix Rodriguez has been fighting to avenge the CIA's failure, a secret soldier in the shadow world of U.S. clandestine operations. And no ordinary soldier: Rodriguez's exploits are the stuff, in the words of one of his comrades, "of a book—no, more than just one book."

Under one false name or another, Rodriguez has landed secretly in Cuba at least six times. He has

fought in Vietnam, the Congo and El Salvador. In 1967, he helped Bolivian troops capture Castro's lieutenant, Ernesto (Che) Guevara, as he was spreading Marxist revolution in South America; Rodriguez still wears Guevara's wristwatch to prove it.

His odyssey has taken him to the CIA's sprawling Virginia headquarters and even to the White House office of Vice President George Bush.

When a man called "Max Gomez" was named as the El Salvador-based chief of a secret airborne supply line for Nicaraguan rebels, it came as no surprise to veterans of clandestine warfare that his real name was Felix Rodriguez.

And today, Felix Rodriguez, the anonymous hero of a hundred unknown battles, is in the middle of a highly public controversy over America's role in Nicaragua.

The Reagan Administration—and his old comrades-in-arms—say Rodriguez was acting as a private citizen, with no direction or pay from the U.S. government he served for so long. But the evidence has mounted that, while Rodriguez left the CIA payroll years ago, he remained solidly inside the shadow world of clandestine operations—a private soldier in a secret but public cause.

When Congress cut off U.S. money for the *contras* fighting to overthrow the Cuban-inspired, Nicaraguan regime, President Reagan appealed to conservative anti-Communists for help—and Rodriguez was there. His story explains much of how the Reagan Administration could assemble a private U.S. network to help the *contras* continue their war despite Congress' ban.

It also illuminates some of the CIA's secret wars that have long been little known, and a few operations that have never before been revealed in detail.

"He's a patriot," said Bush, who has acknowledged meeting Rodriguez three times. "I know what he was doing in El Salvador, and I strongly support it. . . . This man, an expert in counterinsurgency, was down there helping them put down a Communist-led revolution."

"He's an authentic American hero," says a former Green Beret who worked with him in El Salvador. "He doesn't do it for the money. He just wants to get the goddamn Communists out of Central America."

Rodriguez has reportedly lain low in Miami ever since he was publicly identified as the chief of the *contras*' supply operation by Eugene Hasenfus, an American crewman captured by Sandinista troops after his C-123 cargo plane was shot down inside Nicaragua. He did not respond to several requests for an interview.

But many of his friends and comrades-in-arms did agree to speak—some because they believe it is time that he received some credit for his exploits, others because they fear he may be made a scapegoat in the furor over the crash.

Felix Ismael Rodriguez Mendiutia, now 45, was born May 31, 1941, the son of a middle-class shopkeeper in the quiet colonial town of Sancti Spiritus southeast of Havana. He attended a Catholic high school in Havana and a private boys' school in Pennsylvania, but before he could return to Cuba, the leftist revolution of Fidel Castro seized power. Rodriguez's parents, who were in Mexico during the revolution, never went home.

Like many young men from conservative, anti-Communist families, young Rodriguez joined Brigade 2506, the Cuban exile organization armed by the CIA to overthrow Castro. At the CIA's secret training camp in Guatemala,

he excelled at intelligence, sabotage, psychological operations, weapons and explosives—and at the age of 19, impressed his comrades as a single-minded warrior.

"He was very motivated," recalled Jose Basulto, a brigade veteran and longtime friend, in an interview in Miami. "He has always been a very motivated individual."

The CIA named Rodriguez the leader of a five-man infiltration team whose mission was to help prepare an internal uprising to coincide with the invasion at the Bay of Pigs. At the end of February, 1961, the saboteurs left Key West on a 26-foot motor launch and crossed the Florida Strait, landing at night east of Havana.

Florida state Rep. Javier Souto, who was on the same boat, said that Rodriguez was assigned to the eastern city of Moron, where his specialties were to be weapons and explosives for the uprising. But when the invasion failed, the infiltration teams were left high and dry. Rodriguez made his way back to Havana and took political asylum in the Venezuelan Embassy; a few months later, he was granted permission to leave the country.

But Rodriguez's anti-Castro crusade was far from over. Miami was a hotbed of feverish exile plotting against Castro's regime.

Basulto, now a Miami engineer, said that Rodriguez participated in at least six sabotage raids on Cuba and attempts to infiltrate the island, some of them CIA-assisted.

In about 1963, Rodriguez, Basulto and more than 100 other Bay of Pigs veterans joined a special U.S. Army officer's training program at Ft. Benning, Ga. A few officers were selected for a new wave of CIA-sponsored boat attacks against Castro; among them was Rodriguez, who became the group's chief of communications.

One of the group's most notorious actions was the sinking of a Spanish freighter in the Caribbean by mistake. No large-scale action against Cuba was ever taken, however, and the CIA phased the project out.

In the mid-1960s, the thread of Rodriguez's career becomes difficult to trace. He apparently told some friends that he had returned to the army, but Basulto, his closest friend, says that was a cover story; Rodriguez was now a full-time officer in the CIA's clandestine service.

"He worked for years for the CIA until he retired," Basulto said. "And I know he retired, because I have seen his retirement papers. I think he has the highest decoration the CIA gives."

In 1967 came the undisputed high point of Rodriguez's career: the capture of Ernesto (Che) Guevara.

Guevara, an Argentine theorist of revolution who was sent abroad by Castro as his apostle of revolution, was in Bolivia trying to start a rural guerrilla movement. A Bolivian army ranger team, advised by

the CIA, caught up with him in October, 1967.

His capture was sweet retribution for the Cuban-Americans, led by Rodriguez, who were fighting for the CIA—but the incident left Rodriguez speaking of Guevara with unexpected esteem.

"I would say that Felix is the greatest guerrilla of all time, because he captured Che Guevara," said Jorge Mas Canosa, founder of the Cuban American National Foundation.

As a result of Guevara's capture, Rodriguez was rumored to be No. 1 on the "hit list" of Castro's secret intelligence service, the DGI.

In any case, in the late 1960s, the CIA was swiftly expanding its operations in support of the war in Vietnam, and characteristically, Felix Rodriguez went along.

"He was in there for a long time," a CIA veteran said. "He was down in the (Mekong) Delta. He was a self-taught helicopter pilot. He did some very brave things."

"He was shot down twice by enemy ground fire," Basulto recalled. As a result of the last crash, most of the vertebrae in Rodriguez's back were fused and he reluctantly returned from the war. In about 1975, he retired from the CIA with full medical disability pay.

But Rodriguez left the CIA with a host of key contacts around the world and in Washington, where his friends included Theodore Shackley, a former deputy director

of the agency, and Donald Gregg, now the national security adviser to Vice President Bush—himself a former director of the CIA.

His war against communism—and against Fidel Castro—was still not over.

Back home in Miami, Rodriguez apparently returned to the Cuban exile organizations with which he had begun. And after leftist revolutions sprang up in Nicaragua in 1979, and El Salvador in 1980, he heard a call to duty again.

In about 1981, Basulto said, Rodriguez went to Honduras to help the anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan exiles there—the nucleus of the force that would later become the contras. This was even before the Reagan Administration had adopted their cause, Basulto said. "There was no CIA involved at that time."

The CIA moved into the fight at the end of 1981, and again Rodriguez's traces disappeared. American agents raided Nicaragua's coast by boat, ran air strikes into the country and helped the contras organize their army—but Rodriguez's friends, and contra sources, insist that Felix was not among them.

Yet, when Congress cut off the contras' funding in 1984, Rodriguez almost instantly reappeared, organizing private help for the rebels in Miami. "I met him then," said Adolfo Calero, the leader of the largest contra army. "To me, he's a damn good man—a patriot, a free-lancer for democracy."